



CINEMA CULTURE: A REAPPRAISAL OF FRENCH AND AMERICAN HISTORY THROUGH ITS IMPACT ON THE MEDIUM

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ABSTRACT

In the past, propagandist culture was used in the Cold War to fuel hate between ideologies of the Soviet Union and its economic communist system, and the USA and its capitalist economic system. As the Cold War was a time of vast development, this was delivered in a myriad of ways. Although these tensions are known to have ended in 1991, in our modern world, similar tensions are seen between the USA, a capitalist system, and China, a communist system. Thus, this academic paper compares and contrasts propagandist culture from then and now in the fields of nuclear culture, social culture/remarks, popular culture, and media. The paper found astounding resemblances between these two; although there were differences pointed out in terms of intensity and forwardness. This paper found that Cold War-like tensions can be expected in the future in terms of cultural impact.

KEYWORDS: USA, Soviet Union, China, Communism, Capitalism, Propaganda, Ideologies, Indoctrination, Culture.

INTRODUCTION

This past December, Paramount Pictures released Academy Award-winning director Damien Chazelle's *Babylon*, a decade-spanning portrait of early Hollywood starring Margot Robbie and Brad Pitt. Although buzzy on paper, the film received mixed reviews, as per Metacritic ("*Babylon*," 2022), and had a domestic opening weekend of \$3.6 million on a \$78 million budget, according to IMDb ("*Babylon*," 2022). In the following month, *Babylon* premiered in European territories such as France, Italy, United Kingdom, and Germany. In France alone, the film made \$3.3 million (IMDb, 2022) in its first weekend, even with slightly over a fifth of America's population based on World Bank estimates ("*Population, total*," n.d.).

Yet *Babylon* is far from an exception; box office numbers, critical reception, and production standards in the United States have historically differed from those of France as a result of differing sociopolitical context, artistic tendencies, and business models. While America has mainly focused on churning out audience-friendly, effects-heavy fare, France has continuously put artistic merit first. Although most of Hollywood's major tentpoles largely eclipse French works in industrial aspects such as ticket sales and popularity, the latter industry comparably succeeds in crafting more culturally rewarding stories. This can be attributed to each nation's diversions tracing back to the beginning of the medium.

The Birth of Filmmaking

According to Lewis (2019), American film began with the help of a group of major inventions, among them the telephone, phonograph, the first "horseless carriage," and Thomas Edison's first projected and screened moving pictures, with many film companies taking inspiration from other successful industries. After a trip to France where he was introduced to a camera that shot sequential photos, Edison began working on one himself, looking for a system through which film stock could move within the camera. Electrical engineer and photographer William Kennedy Laurie Dickson, an employee of Edison and his main helper throughout the project, eventually settled on vertically placing 35 millimeter-width film and replaying it at 40 frames per second, creating a rapid image. Edison then got a U.S. patent for the Kinetograph, which produced the images, and Kinetoscope, which showed them, in 1891. Yet he never secured international rights, allowing for the French to create their own film camera (Lewis, 2019).

As per Lewis (2019), Brothers Auguste and Louis Lumière patented their own, more practical "cinématographe" — which combined the film processor, camera, and projector into one, running at the eventual silent film standard of 16 frames per second — in 1894, and quickly began making and screening short films across Paris. L'arrivée d'un train en gare à la Ciotat (*The Arrival of a Train at la Ciotat*) remains their most popular picture, creating the popular legend of moviegoers shielding themselves in fear that an actual train was coming their way (Lewis, 2019).

Filmmaking in the Early 20th Century

With the arrival of the twentieth century, Lewis (2019) adds, came the beginning of commercial film exhibition. The success of business ventures such as nickelodeons (short films that cost a nickel to watch, hence the name) prompted the opening of cinemas across America, becoming a pop-culture attraction to enjoy during one's free time. Many companies began offering extensions to the cinematic experience, creating theme park rides and other attractions that utilized

moving images. Moviegoing grew into a staple of American culture, uniting people of all places and classes to enjoy a variety of short stories in the same room. Demand rapidly grew, yet movie projection remained a tough and hazardous job, requiring the continuous cranking of the projector and handling of highly flammable film. America's film mecca began its formation as a result of many film companies moving to the west, with the first studios establishing around the area now known as Hollywood at the beginning of the 1910's (Lewis, 2019).

Yet even in American film exhibition's earliest days, the French had a great influence on the culture surrounding the seventh art, as mentioned by Lewis (2019). George Méliès, a French magician turned filmmaker, made a variety of cinematically inventive short films with the intention of entertaining audiences. *A Trip to the Moon* (1902) is by far his best-known film. It was distributed widely across America in 1902 and 1903, yet mostly in pirated form, meaning Méliès received none of the financial revenue. His style is recognized for its use of scrim to continuously change the scenery of his films, very much like a stage play (Lewis, 2019). According to Forbes and Street (2000), the early French film industry was mostly limited to select large towns and cities, causing a reliance on exports for profits, the largest market being the United States. Only a third of the films screened in America in the decade before World War I were American (Forbes & Street, 2000).

As per Lewis (2019), the duration and aftermath of World War I along with the transition into the Roaring Twenties coincided with America's Silent Era, lasting from 1915 to 1928. Cinema's visual nature made it a highly accessible and inspiring medium for all American residents, including immigrants. New York and Chicago, the two biggest film markets in America at the time, either had a population or film audience of 70% or more immigrants. This era brought film's earliest stars, among them Douglas Fairbanks and Mary Pickford, yet a range of scandals around the Hollywood territory arose questions surrounding the regulation of these figures. The move west as a challenge to the Motion Picture Patents Company (MPPC) trust (a highly restrictive organization that sought to control the industry) gave the new movie studios the power necessary to quickly become their own monopolies, aggressively eliminating competition and making the rules themselves. Among these studios were Universal, 20th Century Fox, Paramount, Metro-Goldwyn-Meyer (MGM), and Warner Bros., all major companies to this day (Lewis, 2019). The business-heavy model of American filmmaking can be traced back to this early fight to reap the benefits of a young medium.

Having lagged behind Europe before World War I, the American film industry was entirely revitalized by technological innovation, allowing for synchronized sound to accompany the moving picture. The Western Electric Company extensively improved a sound recording system named the Vitaphone, which Warner Bros quickly gained interest in acquiring, as per the Encyclopedia Britannica (2023). In 1927, the studio released *The Jazz Singer*, the first feature-length, mass-distributed movie with synchronized audio and a mark of the beginning of the transition towards "talkies" ("*History of Film - The Pre-World War II sound era*," 2023). Soon after the film reached Europe in 1928, the continent was overcome by a turf war around sound technology, as detailed by Forbes and Street (2000). France sided with Germany's Tobis-Klangfilm, which stopped Western Electric from selling their system in Europe until a deal was reached in 1930, dividing the region's market into German and American-controlled nations (Forbes & Street, 2000). According to the Encyclopedia Britannica (2023), the move to sound began as quite the nightmare for cast and crew alike. Microphones

had to be stationary and easily picked up the slightest of sounds, forcing actors to remain practically still. Both the camera and its operator had to be in a small, hot soundproof booth in order to avoid further noise ("History of Film - The Pre-World War II sound era," 2023).

Film further cemented itself as a propaganda method with the arrival of World War 2, which simultaneously inspired the creation of the most prestigious film festival in history. Germany's *The Triumph of the Will* paved the way for America's churning of political vehicles after joining the war effort, which, according to the Encyclopedia Britannica (n.d.), was overseen by the Bureau of Motion Picture Affairs ("The war years and post-World War II trends," n.d.). Forbes and Street (2000) write how German-occupied France saw the acquisition of major Parisian film studios, yet filmmakers evaded censorship by straying from modern settings and subjects, instead utilizing the past to tell timely stories (Forbes & Street, 2000). After witnessing the Venice Film Festival's favoring of a Nazi propaganda documentary, Frenchman Philippe Erlanger proposed the initiative of a free festival, which was eagerly approved by Minister for Education and Fine Arts Jean Zay, as mentioned by the city of Cannes' official website. Eventually settling on Cannes as the hosting city, the festival was to be held from September 1 to 20, 1939. Worsening situations surrounding the war forced the event to be canceled, with war being declared on September 3. Once the war ended, the Cannes Film Festival had its official first edition in 1946 ("History of the Film Festival," n.d.).

Post-World War 2 Filmmaking & the End of the 20th Century

Post-war Hollywood brought the second half of Hollywood's Golden Age, a time of changing sensibilities and innovative filmmaking. The film noir, a highly stylized yet realistically pessimistic extension of the crime genre, perfectly captured American society's settling from the bloodshed, as argued by Lewis (2019). Directors Alfred Hitchcock and Orson Welles were among the biggest directors of this era and genre, best known for its consistent use of shadows, predominant nighttime scenes, and varying camera angles. The auteur theory, the idea that films are largely a result of the director's vision, created a cult-like following around filmmakers. Censorship became a major subject of debate among artists, companies, and the American government. Production codes enforced by the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) led to studios struggling to create products for select audiences. Mike Nichols' *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1966) caused the MPAA to create a Mature Audiences rating, yet Michelangelo Antonioni's *Blow-Up* (1966) was the last blow towards the old rating's system, which left the power to local boards. Audience-targeted genres grew in popularity, among them the western, the teen movie, and the musical. Superstardom only grew as a major selling point for audiences and source of income for media outlets, with the iconic Marilyn Monroe perfectly symbolizing the public's obsession with the figures of the silver screen (Lewis, 2019). As a whole, the Golden Age of Hollywood showed how an ever-changing America required cinema to remain ahead of the curve rather than be subjected to tradition and conventions.

For all of its major subversion of previous cinematic standards, post-World War 2 American filmmaking greatly owes its successes to the considerable influence of the French New Wave. Forbes and Street (2000) detail how the Cold War prompted France and Italy to avoid the 'Coca-Cola Culture' and 'American Imperialism' permeating Hollywood. Europe as a whole tried to stop the 'americanisation' of the continent, with car ownership and television being passionately opposed by many in this effort. The Cannes Film Festival became the mecca for filmmakers, companies, and press, as it offered the possibility of selling films based on artistic merit. François Truffaut's Best Director prize win at Cannes in 1959 for *The 400 Blows* opened this new wave of French cinema, with young directors like Jean-Luc Godard, Éric Rohmer, and Jacques Rivette all beginning around this time (Forbes & Street, 2000). Although Forbes and Street (2000) notably omit both Jacques Demy and Agnès Varda, the filmmaking couple behind many of the movement's most revered and beloved films, their assertions surrounding this period's socio-political environment contextualize yet another important moment in the division between American and French filmmaking, particularly as influenced by geography and culture. As observed by Ferrier (2022), the Wave is known for its youth-ridden filmmaking filled with aesthetic experimentation and frequent use of the handheld camera, with the studio model tossed aside for the freedom of improvisation and artistic control (Ferrier, 2022). The auteur theory was, in fact, largely popularized by *Cahiers du Cinéma*, a film magazine that many of the aforementioned directors worked with, as detailed by the Encyclopedia Britannica ("New Wave," 2018). Lewis (2019) contends that popular American films of the time, particularly *Bonnie and Clyde* and *The Graduate*, notably took inspiration from the likes of Godard and Truffaut (Lewis, 2019). As worded in the Criterion Channel's introduction of their French New Wave collection, "There was cinema before the French New Wave, and there was cinema after" ("French New Wave," n.d.).

The following decades brought a variety of advancements to the medium, along with the idea of creating works of political relevance within America, as observed by Lewis (2019). Directors Francis Ford Coppola, Martin Scorsese, Stanley Kubrick, Steven Spielberg, and George Lucas, among many others, pushed the seventh art into new and exciting places, constantly challenging studio expectations and broadening audiences' horizons. Genres such as horror, comedy, and the western constantly shapeshifted in tendencies and techniques, with more graphic and boundary-pushing works entering the mainstream. Newer,

more profit-driven types of films such as comic book adaptations and science fiction largely grew in popularity, the idea of spectacle being pushed to the maximum by special effects and other forms of modern technology. Auteurism further continued, bringing a surge of new filmmakers into the spotlight, among them Spike Lee and Oliver Stone. Box office only became a stronger factor within Hollywood, the marketability of stars, premises, and familiarity — the birth of the sequel — impacting studio support (Lewis, 2019). The European continent as a whole faced growing concerns over television's impact on decreasing film attendance, expressed by Forbes and Street (2000). Eventually, competition became less fierce as both mediums found coexistence possible. Television companies were no longer banned from investing in cinema across France. The nation also saw the creation of the Institut National de l'Audiovisuel, which invested in experimental films during the late seventies, most likely as a result of the French New Wave's impact on the nation's film culture. This support, however, dwindled by the 80's, mostly as television became deregulated across Europe and company funding grew. Governments remained a source of financing, largely encouraging film production with tax benefits and the creation of new television channels (Forbes & Street, 2000).

Cinema in the New Millennium

With the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the new millennium, corporate and international priorities greatly shifted. Detailed by Forbes and Street (2000), the end of the Cold War brought the discussion as to whether cinema should be seen as a product of free trade or a cultural staple requiring regulation, with the European Union arguing the latter. European distribution was quickly identified as an area for improvement, yet the continent's insistence on cultural value and maintaining artistic integrity has limited its nations' ability to remotely match the Hollywood complex in terms of scope and access. America's marketability as a utopian melting pot gathering the finest entertainers of the world reached a new stratosphere as a result of cinematic trends, whereas Europe's insistence on countering Hollywood universalism with the idea of the recognizable 'national film' limited its global reach. Europe continues to struggle to combat American competition, particularly as a result of the differing ways the art and the studio film address their audience, one requiring receptiveness to experimentation and the other warningly inviting the mass audience (Forbes & Street, 2000). For this very reason, Lewis (2019) iterates, the independent cinema scene massively grew, with the likes of David Lynch and Quentin Tarantino among the most recognizable names in the dying breed of mainstream, seat-filling auteurs. Women filmmakers mostly remained limited to working within 'female-friendly' genres or arthouse fare, generally dependent on small budgets. The Sundance Film Festival greatly aided many American filmmakers in finding distribution and getting future projects greenlit, yet many women, particularly those of ethnic minorities, struggled to receive this support regardless of their debut films' critical successes (Lewis, 2019). This great financial gap between profitable, merchandise-heavy products and thought-provoking, mold-breaking works hinted at the increasingly finance-based American film model yet to come.

Over a hundred years since cinema's beginnings, technological improvements have brought the digitization of the moving picture. Even with streaming first entering the picture in the early 2010's, it took the COVID-19 pandemic to slice the earnings of theatrical exhibition; according to the Amazon-owned Box Office Mojo (2023), nine films released in 2019 passed the billion-dollar mark at the global box office. Since 2020, only four films have achieved this feat ("Top Lifetime Grosses," 2023). The one commonality among all of these highly successful projects: intellectual property. Nostalgia has become Hollywood's go-to moneymaker, milking all potential franchises of every narrative extension imaginable that may rake in further revenue. Auteurism has mostly become limited to critic circles and the festival circuit — Cannes continues to lead the pack, with Venice hot in its heels — the likes of Jordan Peele and Wes Anderson being the rare exceptions ("Jordan Peele," 2023; "Wes Anderson," 2023). As nations continue to recover from the pandemic, France's role as a film leader among non-Anglo-Saxon countries has only become clearer. According to the International Union of Cinemas (UNIC)'s 2022 film report, France saw 95.5 million movie theater admissions in 2021, only behind Russia (145.7 million) ("Annual Report 2022," 2022). The future of cinema, both at home and in theaters, remains a lingering unknown, hugely dependent on the decisions of entertainment giants such as Netflix, Disney, Amazon, and Warner Bros. While critical and financial success have never been at such odds as in the current cinematic landscape, exciting filmmaking voices continue to appear and grow across today's endless media platforms.

Conclusion

While present-day mainstream American cinema has boxed itself within the blockbuster parameters — with independent projects rarely economically succeeding beyond festivals and streaming — French film has sustained its status as a key curator of the seventh art, highly investing in its cultural value and appreciation. Differing technology, political movements, geographical sensibilities, and competition tactics birthed two poles of this audiovisual medium, each wielding its own double-edged sword. As filmmaking continues shapeshifting, the importance of contextualizing both nations' cinematic history could not be more valuable, providing great insight into the trends and influences of the moving picture's future.

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